

4. The Change-over

Kes waited for everyone's attention to be caught by whatever they were here for—the music ha ha, the SkinGifter women, and/or which child they would adopt—before he slipped away. Finally even his uncle Joff turned to something Grandfa Hardin said.

He stepped soundlessly into the water beside the island. One step and he was between the reeds. He'd practised moving between them without them rippling when he was thirteen. Him alone for a week, surviving. Not the hardest thing he ever did.

He waded gently until he reached a path to the nearest SkinGifter camp that he recalled, out of sight of the herder day-camp. Waded beside the path until he could see the whole little island. A raffish old mat covered the things the SkinGifters would need, firestones, an old iron lid they used to cook things in, a pile of driftwood. This island was the nearest, the smallest, the most secret. *Had to be the one where they'd camp after the Tribute.* He wondered where *she* was.

He remembered all the things he still had to achieve. *Make a start finding the food.* He grappled through the silky mud for reed roots. Looked up. Around. Still not here. He caught an eel trying too late to wriggle away from his toes. He bit through its spine behind the head and coiled it in the path. He looked up.

There she was. She blushed and he instantly felt hot and red and ready. And he blushed too, like a fury.

She kneeled and slowly took shellfish from her waist-pocket and put them on the iron lid. She hardly trembled at all but watched him as though she was mesmerised.

Which *he* was. Standing and standing there. Staring. Looking. Drinking her in. Her breasts again. Her hair, like smoke, with the silvery overlay. Her eyes, green, sparkling at him. Her face was heart-shaped. Her knees ...

His uncle laughed from nearby. "Kes, We're hungry. Hurry on back."

The girl slid into the reeds opposite. She left her shellfish, the lid, the mat akimbo.

Kes picked up the eel and turned. Trampled back through the reeds. He slapped his feet into the water. *Splash splash. Come and get me Uncle and you will know the real Kes.* Spied him, his brown cloak, through the reeds. Kes listened towards the SkinGifter camp-isle. He swallowed the temptation to start something big, like jump the uncle-bastard and drown him. "You lost me a good eel through your stupid tricks," he said.

"An eel! Ha! I wasn't born yesterday, boy."

"Here!" Kes threw the eel at his uncle, not caring at that moment if it came back to life. "You skin it since you're so hungry. I'll fetch the water." He sprang onto the island and seized the kettle. "You look hungry as well, Lariat. Why don't you help Joff catch the fish I just lost." Maybe it wasn't fair to pick on the only person present he'd fought and overcome, but he felt murderous.

He splashed upstream. He'd have to combine his trip to the spring with the one fetching the fostering slaves. At the cave he was surprised to see the slaves sitting outside sunning

themselves. The three women sat legs stretched with their cloaks rumpled to their thighs, to the left of the cave entry. The delta-born squatted to the right.

Though their chains had been replaced for the occasion with rope bracelets, they hadn't tried to run. Realising probably that the valley was too small to hide in and the desert beyond it unknowable. Funny, though, how the prospective fostering mothers—a trio of Three Cities women sentenced to the green-lands—were less afraid of their captors as represented by Kes, than of the delta-born foster-father, a sight to behold with his dirty, blond, butt-length dreads and his splotching grey skin.

The significance of the delta-born's hair and skin were just another two things Kes in his former attitude had tried to ignore. He waved a sketchy acknowledgement while running past. The underground river bubbled out of the rocks above the Swamp's valley and overflowed into it. He filled the kettle under the waterfall and lugged it back to the cave. The foster-parents were on their feet. Waiting for him. Did he ask that with his wave? *Who knew.*

The women gave an impression of desert dun, with nondescript shin-length gowns and cloaks and light brown to grey hair in knots at the back of their heads, like they wore some kind of uniform. They were mature, even grandmotherly, farm labourers when they were taken by Joff and his ilk, for the fostering. The delta-born wore his dreads and a rag about his middle.

None would be sold while they fostered a Tribute child and he saw in their eyes that they would try to escape once the caravan reached their tribal lands. As he would've, were he them. "I won't be standing in your way," he said.

The delta-born produced a stick almost as if he accepted Kes's comment as a promise, and would now help him. He slid the stick under the kettle's handle and helped Kes carry it so that they lost hardly any water. At the camp Kes set it in the coals before showing the foster slaves to their place.

"Eeeeeee!"

The shriek stopped everything. Birds, insects. Drums and pipes. Everyone looked.

The oldest of the SkinGifter women. She screamed again. "Eeeee!" At the end of the scream, the woman sucked in air. She screeched again, finishing with a broken sobbing.

More air. More screaming. "Ahni! Eeeee! Ahni, help me! Eeeee! The switch!"

She came. The girl. Not looking aside. She brought a large pebble and a handful of strappy leaves. She fell to her knees in front of the screaming woman and freed her hand of various frazzled ties.

Someone laughed.

Joff, Kes saw with a lightning glance.

The girl slapped the stone on the old woman's hand and held a length of grass over it. The screeching toned down. The girl began to tie the pebble in the old one's hand. The shrieking stopped by the degrees that the bindings were tightened.

"We haven't seen her before," Joff said.

"Her hair is very distinctive," Marl agreed.

“She’s young to be a wife, too old to be a child,” Lariat said, trying for wise beyond his years.

The only other sound was the old one sobbing. The Tribute party seemed as stunned as the herders. All of them looked to the lone Sister staring without blinking. Her lips moved. She seemed to pray.

Kes did too. *Don’t look up, he told the girl in his thoughts. Don’t let them see your eyes. I won’t tell. Don’t look up.*

She’d curtained her face with her hair. She rose from her knees in one elegant move and stepped into the mud and the reeds. Hardly riffling them, she was gone in a seconds.

He exulted because he knew her name. Ahni.

Joff, snorting with laughter, juggled Kuri’s elbow. “We haven’t a girl for the Grand Devil yet. Send the go-man after her.”

“She’s obviously the old woman’s apprentice,” Kuri-mother said. “Do you want them left without a healer?”

As if she took Joff seriously. Was she a mother or was she ...? He wasn’t going there. She was smart. She’d know things Joff didn’t. He was the dumbest fucker that ever lived. Kes wanted to punch the bastard. He wanted to cry. Scream. Rage.

“Did you see your idiot boy eating her with his love-struck eyes?” Joff said. He laughed some more. “You might as well be about your work, Runt. They’ll transfer the implant into her and her beauty will be snuffed out like a wick light.”

“Get some background music happening,” Kuri-chief said. “Kes, bring up the numbers.” She ignored Joff totally.

Was that meant to be Kes’s strategy too? He turned for the slaves.

The delta-born stood readier than the women. He walked between the musicians and sat down opposite the older mother and her little girl.

Bemused, hardly knowing his work, Kes encouraged the three foster-mothers to follow the delta-born’s lead. He beckoned them with his head, gesturing with his hands to hurry them along. He didn’t trust himself to speak. The fostering women sat opposite the younger weeping mothers. Something he might want to do too, sometime soon. The children hid themselves in their mother’s arms. The musicians made camel-calves of sound skipping and playing.

Kuri nodded.

The older mother walked her little girl to where the delta-born sat and kneeled in front of him.

So much for calculations of boy/girl ratios and providing a like-gender foster parent for each child. Kes didn’t hear what the delta-born named himself.

“This is Kenly,” the mother said with her arm around the child standing without crying by her mother’s side. “I will see you both at the end of the rainbow.”

Was the child even old enough to know what her mother said? Kes couldn't remember what he knew when he was four. His people would revile him forever if he honoured such a goodbye-for-ever. Staring straight ahead, in his thoughts beating himself around the head for his cowardice, he saw the delta-born reach up and thumb a tear from the mother's eye and lick it from his thumb as if he made her a promise.

Kes made a promise too, to himself. *You are not a hunter. From now.*

Joff and company, he saw with a quick glance, were engrossed in the pain of the young mothers and their silent sobbing struggles to deliver their children into the waiting arms of the foster mothers.

Each foster mother hid the child that came to her under her cloak. *Out of sight, out of mind.* As if they'd done it before. Almost before Kuri signalled him, Kes started to usher the foster parents and children away. The delta-born led with Kenly, her hand in his. Kenly chattered. Kes wished he could hear their conversation. The foster-mothers carried their fosterlings in their arms, hidden in their cloaks.

Kes led the foster-parents and the children into the turn-off to where the western cliffs bulged in and made a little round valley. Ages past, a stair had been cut into the back. He hustled everyone up the stairs and out onto the plain. The sun was in the west. As was the herd. He chose his charges a camping place, a dip in the grassland though it was only late afternoon. They could get to know one another, he reasoned.

The wind up here was fresh and the delta-born shivered, having no cloak but six ropes of hair.

Kes shrugged out of his cloak, dry now, and nodded at the guy. "You'll be cold in the night. And her too." He had no idea whether the delta-born knew his language. He hung his cloak over the man's shoulder, and ran back to the edge of the grassland. Dithered at the top of the cliff. Go back to the swamp, see if ...?

She'd be with her people. Safe for the moment from his people. *Let sleeping wolves lie.*

He searched out a dip in the land. Made a three camel-turd fire. Dreamed.

No one came until dawn and then it was his mother. She carried her mask on the back of her belt. "I heard your teeth chattering or I would've had to order a search," she said. She sat down opposite, ready to smile. She had brown eyes.

How could he have forgotten that? "Lucky you came when you did." He wanted to smile with her but he'd been on his own too long, getting into cowardly thoughts again. He settled for a lopsided frown. "I was just wondering whether ..." He glanced toward the cliff, the valley below it. Too small to support a hermit? "I'm too different from everyone else."

He closed his eyes against the mad glitter in hers. "But don't worry. I need to save that girl, Ahni, from Joff and them." Saying it out loud he might get a clue on how to make it happen. "Give the Grand Devil a bunch of reeds for all I care."

"That's a good idea," she said.

His eyes snapped open, hardly daring to believe his ears. That she even would agree with anything he said.

She smiled fixedly, more a glare, but with the glitter still in there. *Being my mother.* “I brought you a couple of slabs of bread.” *Right. Being the chief, too. Even-handed, her own brood no favours.* He rose. “Thanks. I mean ...” He dithered. Again.

Then she was up too. Hugged him hard with her ribs grating over his, their skin pinched between. “Go. Herdie camp,” she said.

“Water ... should I?” He looked toward the creek.

“Herdie camp,” she said again.

He jogged away, tearing at the bread. He stuffed it in his gob, mixing it with spit and crying. Forcing it down his gullet.